

HIGH MOUNTAIN LAKES, GREYLING, AND WAR

(Publisher's Note: My father, LaVarr B. Webb, was an avid fisherman and prolific writer. He passed away a number of years ago, but in his later years he wrote dozens of essays and stories about his life, particularly his outdoors experiences. This is one of them.)

In September, 1939, my friend Jake and I coaxed and pushed the old Model A Ford over the ruts and rocks of the dirt road that twisted up the mountain face north of Soapstone in the high Uintas. We were looking for fishing lakes that we knew were in the area.

We parked our fishing buggy, the Ford, at the end of the road, found a trail, and hiked through the towering timber, lush meadows, and rocky humps to Hour Glass Lake. There we set up camp, and started fishing on one of the most picturesque lakes in Utah.

We were using dry flies. On my first cast, I saw the swirl of water as a fish broke the surface, and then hit my fly. I tried to set the hook, and lost the fish. The next cast produced the same result – the fish breaking the surface, the strike, the setting of the hook, but no fish.

I hollered at Jake to see how he was doing. "I can't hang on to them," he said. "They strike, then throw the hook or something. I'm going to let them run a little before setting the hook." We tried that, but with little success. We finally figured out that we were too rough. We were jerking the hook out of the mouths of the fish. So, we just barely twitched the end of the rod when we set the hook, and we played the fish gently.

I brought the first fish to net. It wasn't what I expected. It looked like a cross between a flying fish and a rainbow, with big, paddle-like fins, a tall, sail-like dorsal fin, and a body as streamlined as a torpedo. They were greyling, the first we had ever seen. We discovered that, unlike trout, they had very tender mouths. It was necessary to use a light touch when setting the hook or it would literally tear through the lips of those fish.

Those greyling were fun to catch because of the skill required to bring them in but also because they were scrappy. They fought right up to the net. Neither Jake nor I had ever eaten one, so we decided to fry some for supper.

I was chopping wood for a fire when a man, a big, bearded, rugged outdoor type, walked into camp. He said, "Howdy. You fishermen?"

I answered, "Yes, and you?"

"Oh, I do a little fishing," he said. "I'm a sheepherder. My herd's over the next ridge. Then he asked me, "What are you hacking on that wood for?"

A little surprised, I answered, "I'm cutting wood for a fire. We're going to have fish for supper."

Our visitor laughed. "One thing you learn as a sheepherder is that you don't have to cut wood for a campfire. You put three long logs on a fire, let them burn through, and you have six pieces of wood. You keep burning through the longer pieces and you have shorter pieces. I never chop wood. I let the fire do the work." Then he asked, "What's going on in the world?"

I answered, "What do you mean, what's going on? You don't know there's a war in Europe?"

"A war," he yelled, "Who's fightin'?" He explained he had been with the herd for more than six months and hadn't heard any news.

We told him that the Germans had invaded Poland from the west, and that England and France had declared war on Germany. We also described how Russia had entered the war by also invading Poland from the east.

The news bothered him, and he grumbled, "I never did trust those Ruskies."

Then, we talked world events as we cooked the greyling, prepared the rest of the evening meal, and ate as the shadows of the pine trees lengthened. We debated whether the United States would, or should, enter the war, and we wondered whether we, rather than fishing and herding sheep, might soon be slogging through the mud of Europe and dodging German bullets.

Now, as I look back at that period in our history, the mud, grime, fear and the destruction and devastation of Italy, where I served, hangs behind curtains in the dark corners of my mind. But I can still see clearly the calm waters of Hour Glass Lake, and the aspen and the firs, and I can see the boil of water, and the strike of a greyling, and I can even feel him fight and dive. And I am glad that the joys of that fishing trip are still vivid, while the hell of war has been buried deep in the dark recesses of my mind.

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